

Postcards

from Oregon



By Coleen Vansant, Public Information Manager, Alabama Forestry Commission

Foresters and Forest Rangers with the Alabama Forestry Commission have a huge task - protecting and developing the forest resources of our great state. But aside from fighting fire here in Alabama, writing forest management

plans, assisting landowners, working with rural volunteer fire departments, as well as the many, many other jobs they do, they also wear the hat of emergency response team members.

Very few natural disasters and emergency situations occur in our state

that our associates do not respond to. Not only on their individual county levels where they always assist the local governments and citizens, but statewide as well. The Alabama Forestry Commission (AFC) sent crews to assist after Hurricanes

Frederick, Opal, Ivan, Dennis, and Katrina just to name a few, as well as ice storms, tornados, floods, snow storms, airplane crashes, automobile accidents, search and rescue, even cleaning up after an ice storm that destroyed hundreds of chicken houses in north Alabama . . . an assignment that will forever be referred to as “the chicken detail.”

However, in addition to providing aid and assistance in our own state, the Commission also has crews trained and certified to respond to natural disasters and fire emergencies across the nation. Several AFC wildland firefighters were dispatched to Texas and Oklahoma to help fight wildfires in late December 2005 and early January 2006. Then in May of this year, a team was sent to assist with firefighting in Florida.

This past summer the Commission sent two crews to Oregon to assist the USDA Forest Service in battling wildfires. The further west you go, the greater the difference in firefighting as compared to Alabama. These firefighters were on a mountain in the wilderness areas of Oregon . . . sleeping in tents, eating MREs (“meals ready to eat”) dropped from a helicopter, and going as many as ten days with no bath . . . with grueling terrain, shivering temperatures at night, and “boot bite” (sore feet.) They were transported into the fire zone and then transported back out again several days later.

And to top it all off, they *volunteered* to go. All of the Commission’s emergency details are filled by foresters and rangers who volunteer for the assignment. Each one must meet the strictest training and physical fitness standards.

This photo feature is comprised of pictures taken by the two AFC crews while on fire detail in Oregon this summer (thanks to Ken Colburn, Joey Donnelly, Brigetta Giles, Jason Gillikin, Brandon Hunnicutt, Brian Smith, and Shane Woodham). We have also included comments from a few of the firefighters about their experience out west.

(Continued on page 18)



Our trip to Oregon was great. We had a really good crew, and our morale was up the whole time we were assisting these people in their time of need. Our crew name was “ALABAMA #1” and as you can imagine, we had to live up to that name. (I have enclosed a couple of photo highlights from the trip.) When we first arrived, we met our bus driver whose name was Shaun, probably the coolest guy you could have as a driver, with radio and TV on his bus for our entertainment. As we

boarded the bus, what did we see but a HULA GIRL and the words of “SWEET HOME ALABAMA” blaring on the radio. Then it was off to do the job we were there to do.

After we checked in, we went to set up our tents at the base camp. Of course, everyone was doin’ just fine until Jimbo Robinson and I both opened our tents, and yep, you guessed it, they were “broke.” So, we fixed mine by “MacGiverizing” it with our Southern know-how, and from doin’ it a time or two ourselves. But Jimbo had to sleep under the stars because Supply had no extra tents. Then on Day 2 we went to the “BLACK” and learned we were being “SPIKED OUT” (a form of

camping with no tents, just you and the stars). This is where we spent our next four nights and five days. We got back to base camp to get a hot shower and hot meal, only to learn that we may have to do it all over again the next day.

As planned, we got SPIKED OUT again, this time for two nights and three days. By this time, I became much smarter about the sleeping arrangements and got myself a

“COFFIN” (what everyone called it), and everybody was jealous that

I thought of this idea before them. However, those nights were quite “comfy” for me, as everybody else had to fight the wind and coolness of the mountain air. After we finally got back to base camp, we stayed there the rest of our tour, which was only a couple of days before we got to come home to SWEET HOME ALABAMA.

I really enjoyed my tour in Oregon and hope to go somewhere else this coming year to help others in their time of need.

– Shane Woodham
Forestry Specialist,
Cherokee County



It is a journey not many people will ever take or even *want* to take part in. Long hours, strenuous weather conditions, and six nights/seven days on the side of a mountain with no shower or bathroom. One might call it crazy, but I call it an adventure. I enjoy and appreciate getting to go on these western fire details.

Working along with crews from Alberta, Canada and Victoria, Australia, we used hand tools to “mop up” the fire, meaning putting out hot spots and holding the fire inside the fire line.

The one thing that stands out most about this trip is the high morale level of the crew. We all got along and worked well with each other during our 18-day tour. Our crew boss, Derrick Heckman, did a great job. I worked under James “Moto” Williams in Squad Three. He and Derrick, along with the other squad bosses and crew members, showed great leadership and character, representing the Alabama Forestry Commission to the highest standards. It was a privilege and an honor to work along side each and every one of them.

In closing, here are the Task Force Leader’s remarks on our crew’s performance rating. “After 20 years on fires, this is the crew I’ve had the most fun with. The best attitude dealing with unfamiliar conditions I have ever experienced. If all the crews were this personable, everyone would want my job. Worked hard and did their best every day. Thanks.”

– Joel Bartlett
Forestry Specialist, Marion County



The first Oregon crew from Alabama was comprised of USFS employees, Pelham Fire Department members, and the following AFC associates: Jason Berry (Walker County), Billy Carlisle (Marengo County), Jason Gillikin (Baldwin County), Brigetta Giles (Autauga County), Ashley Haden (Russell County), Jason Keown (Baldwin County), Justin Kinney (Marshall County), Jarred Kornegay (Bibb County), Cary Rhodes (Shelby County), James “Jimbo” Robinson (Chambers County), Gary Thompson (Covington County), Lester Williams (Geneva County), Charles Wise (Randolph County), and Shane Woodham (Cherokee County).



My trip to Oregon was a very rewarding experience. I was quite proud to be on the Alabama crew. We had a great crew boss and a hard-working crew. It was not easy work, and at times we were building direct attack lines. No one complained and the Forest Service praised us for our work.

I was able to see places I would have never seen otherwise. At the first spike camp we were assigned, I awoke to a beautiful view of Idaho on one side of the Snake River, and Oregon on the other side. I don’t believe there were

any guides around that could have taken me to such a spot on any vacation . . . there were NO trails.

I was glad that everyone worked well together and we all had a good sense of humor. I have several good memories and stories I can tell. I met co-workers from all over the state that I had not met before. I enjoy seeing them now at various meetings, and I look forward to working with them and other AFC associates on future details.

– Brigetta Giles
County Manager, Autauga County

This was my first trip out West to participate in a fire detail since I have been with the Forestry Commission. I have to say that the whole trip was a very positive learning experience.

I had the opportunity to see a large fire operation of this kind, not as a spectator, but a participant.

The work was hard but very rewarding. I can't say enough good things about the people on our crew and what a pleasure it was to work with them. It made me proud to be part of this organization.

– **Brandon Hunnicutt**
County Manager, Jackson County



AFC associates making the second trip to Oregon: Joel Bartlett (Marion County), Ken Colburn (Chilton County), Gary Coleman (Coffee County), Joseph Donnelly (Baldwin County), Jason Gillikin (Baldwin County), Crew Boss Derrick Heckman (St. Clair County), Victor Howell (Conecuh County), Brandon Hunnicutt (Madison County), Assistant Crew Boss Bobby Matthews (Cullman County), Cary Rhodes (Shelby County), Brian Smith (Chilton County), Barry Snow (Randolph County), Gary Thompson (Covington County), and James "Moto" Williams (Chambers County).



The second crew that worked on the "Puzzle Fire" in the Cascade Complex just outside Sisters, Oregon, came back with a good understanding of teamwork, commitment, and dedication. We all worked very long days under especially poor conditions, yet most of us never complained, and we kept a positive spirit about the operation and our leadership.

At the end of every day we made a point to reflect on what we had done that day, and what tomorrow might bring. "Tomorrow" didn't always work out the way we had it planned, but each and every day we knew what our job was going to be . . . and we could stop, look behind us, and see what we had accomplished. As a boss and as a crew member, knowing what your job is, and being able to see what you have accomplished, makes a huge difference.

Crew #2 already knows that I appreciated their efforts and dedication, but I would like to publicly commend each of them, **and** the staff here at home that held things together to afford us the opportunity we appreciated in Oregon. And although the five crew members from Kentucky and Tennessee may not see this story, their efforts were quite commendable as well, and we would love to work with them again.

I cannot over-emphasize the great benefits that we as an organization reap from western fire detail through training and exposure to different ways of operating in collaboration with other agencies and states.

– **Derrick Heckman**, Crew Boss, Crew #2
County Manager, St. Clair County

